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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on recent research in English classrooms on media education, offers new evidence on the forms of media education currently taught by English teachers, and attempts to connect the current English-language curriculum debate with more general concerns about values and religion in the curriculum. The project involved 11 secondary school English teachers in England to see how they taught about media, specifically advertising, in the secondary classroom. Findings revealed that they visualized their aim as that of helping students to make up their own minds by recognizing that media texts are constructions that represent particular points of view. Most found enthusiastic student response and expressed surprise at the insights they had gained into student perceptions and preferred modes of working when teaching about media. The use of media in education is seen as a way to help students to learn values in an active and interrogative way rather than by passive absorption. Media education offers a powerful, accessible, and effective way to achieve reflection and aesthetic experience by discussion in the classroom. Many English teachers have the basic skills for this type of education because of their special expertise in engaging and developing the imaginations of students. It is suggested that media education opens up a form of literacy that is more than functional and that recognizes that information, in whatever format, is always value-laden. (Contains 16 references.) (NAV)

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LITERACY, VALUES AND NON-LITERARY TEXTS

Andrew Hart

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LITERACY, VALUES AND NON-LITERARY TEXTS

Andrew Hart

Introduction

Debates about the role of the mass media in the cultural and social lives of the young have raged intensely during the last decade. Most recently, the importance of studying the media has also featured prominently in the long-standing conflict over the content of English in the National Curriculum. Opponents of Media Education have focused on the need for an allegedly value-free 'back-to-basics' English curriculum, while its supporters have called for the study of a broad range of literary and media texts as proper objects of study, rather than a prescriptive literary canon. They also call for more opportunity for young people to create their own media texts through critical and practical activity.

This paper draws on recent research in English classrooms reported in earlier *CLE Occasional Papers*. It offers new evidence about the forms of Media Education currently taught by English teachers and attempts to connect the current English debate with more general concerns about values and religion in the curriculum.

The idea of studying the media in school may seem odd to many educators. At first sight, formal education and the mass media have little in common. They represent quite different sets of cultural, aesthetic and social values. According to this view, the only space that schools might give to the media would be to defend their students against media values. As one of the earliest English cultural writers to consider the issues put it:

> Everything acquired at school in the way of aesthetic and moral training is contradicted and attacked by the entertainment industry ... The aim (of schools) is to provide standards against which the offerings of the mass media will appear cut down to size. (Thompson 1964: 17-20)

Yet the Report of the Cox Committee (DES 1989) gave study of media a welcome public prominence. Media Education is seen by Cox as part of "the exploration of contemporary culture" (9.4). It is recognized that Media Education approaches should be part of every English teacher's practice, that "the kinds of question that are routinely applied in Media Education can fruitfully be

applied to literature" (7.23) and that "Media Education has often developed in a very explicit way concepts which are of general importance in English" (9.9). What are these questions and concepts? The main ones are helpfully listed by Cox as "selection (of information, viewpoint, etc.), editing, author, audience, medium, genre, stereotype, etc."(9.9). The questions resolve themselves into "who is communicating with whom and why; how has the text been produced and transmitted; how does it convey its meaning?" (7.23). If made operational, these questions would produce a form of understanding which would fit exactly the definition of media literacy produced by a recent Aspen Institute Conference: "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes" (Aufderheide 1993: v).

Media Education is also seen by the Cox Report as closely related to Information Technology. This is a promising conjunction, provided that we do not mistakenly identify Information Technology as limited to the use of computers. We need to focus on a range of technologies which are used to collect, organise, process and circulate information. This focus is by no means new and it is therefore useful to look at recent developments in teaching about information in the media.

Study of the media has grown in popularity in English secondary schools at least since the 1960s. The main impetus for this growth came from teachers of English, many of whom saw themselves as protectors of children from the 'false consciousness' that the media were believed to inculcate. It was this invasion of consciousness which Marshall McLuhan perceived in the 1960s. He saw education as a form of "civil defense" against "media fall-out" (McLuhan 1973: 208). Worryingly, he saw the invasion as a subliminal one, operating beneath the threshold of consciousness. In a famous phrase, he warned that the content of the media was "like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (McLuhan 1973: 26). This fear of the seduction of the innocent was to dominate the early years of studying the mass media.

In the 1970s and 80s, Media Education grew rapidly, with the creation of new secondary level courses in film studies and later with new courses in Media Studies and national examinations at age 16 and 18. The availability of the VCR gave an enormous boost to media work and made the study of television the dominant focus. However, there was a tension over what kinds of texts

were legitimate objects of study - those valued by teachers or those valued by students? This tension led many teachers to examine their own attitudes in more personal, less theoretical ways, and some recognized the hypocrisy in routine condemnations of what were major sources of information and pleasure for themselves as much as for their students, especially when they formed an important part of students' cultural identities.

Although Media Education has developed rapidly, there has not been a corresponding expansion of training opportunities for teachers. The result is that many work in isolation with little more than examination syllabuses to guide them. Some have inherited responsibility for Media courses from enthusiastic teachers who have moved on. Although some of these 'substitutes' often become enthusiasts themselves, they can too easily find themselves overwhelmed by the scope of the subject and by the unlimited material from which to choose.

Because few teachers have been formally trained in Media Education or Media Studies, there is inevitably a wide variation in theoretical understanding and classroom practice. Notions of Media Education may vary from showing a video recording of a Shakespeare play to the critical study of media institutions and audiences. Some teachers have rejected analytical approaches in favour of creative or technical ones. Others justify the subject for its method alone, arguing, for example, that its emphasis on group work and projects develops social skills.

But, in spite of the diversity of aims and approaches, the importance of systematic Media Education is at last a formally recognized National Curriculum responsibility for English teachers. The most recent starting-points for Media teaching are based on 'Key Concepts' or 'Signpost Questions' (see Figure 1) which enable a holistic cross-media perspective. These conceptual approaches offer the benefit of a robust but flexible framework, but in their attempts to maintain a form of neutrality, they risk abandoning the high ground of moral and spiritual reflection. They are designed to provoke questions about values and ideology, but unfortunately do not guarantee that they will actually do so.

SIGNPOST QUESTIONS

WHO is communicating with whom?	**AGENCIES**
WHAT type of text is it?	**CATEGORIES**
HOW is it produced?	**TECHNOLOGIES**
HOW do we know what it means?	**LANGUAGES**
WHO receives it and what sense do they make of it?	**AUDIENCES**
HOW does it present its subject?	**REPRESENTATIONS**

Figure 1 (after Bazalgette, C. (Ed.) 1989: 8)

Recent research carried out in the School of Education on the kinds of media work undertaken by English teachers shows a wide range of approaches to classroom work and a desire to relate learning to 'real' activities (Hart 1991; Hart and Benson 1992, 1993a, 1993b). The aim of the *Models of Media Education Project* was to illuminate some of the continuities and differences in Media teaching styles of a small group of secondary English teachers. We wanted to explore their perception of Media Education in an English context and to discover how they saw Media work relating to the other responsibilities of English Departments. We also tried to document some of the perceived problems and rewards of teaching and learning about the media. We explored teachers' attitudes to Media Education both as a theoretical discipline and as a classroom subject; their aims for their students; the experience they brought to the work; the key concepts with which they felt most confident and the sources from which their understanding of these concepts derived; their favoured resources and the ways in which these are used; and their expectations for the future of Media Education.

Media teachers

The range of experience of the teachers interviewed was impressive. Most had wide and varied teaching experience, usually involving subjects other than English, and several had business or industrial backgrounds prior to teaching. Surprisingly, there was very little evidence of any professional experience of the media or of active engagement.

They were generally disposed to accept new challenges and inclined to see English as a subject embracing the whole field of communication. Even so, their involvement with media teaching was sometimes patchy and determined more by accident than by conscious pursuit of a career option. Eight of the eleven interviewed had taught for at least ten years and in some cases for more than twenty. None of these had any extended training in Media Education but they had often approached the subject from an interest in Literature and a shifting awareness of literary theory towards ideas that place reader response and a recognition that readers would benefit from reading a range of texts at the centre of their approach. The other three teachers, two of whom were in their probationary year, had deliberately chosen training courses with a Media or Communications content. All of the teachers saw the need for further training in a subject they recognized as changing in its concepts and methods, and all valued the work of county advisers and other training agencies. Most of them believed that Media Education should be a part of students' education throughout their secondary education and possibly before. There was very little anxiety about the subject proliferating into other disciplines and most felt secure about their own contributions to any cross-curricular initiatives. On the other hand, none of the schools concerned had yet developed a school policy for Media Education and in some cases the teachers interviewed proved to be unaware of Media work being done in other departments. Some expressed anxiety about attitudes of colleagues in their own departments and feared some disapproval of what was sometimes seen as the study of ephemera.

They tended to express their aims in terms of helping students to make up their own minds by recognising that media texts are constructions representing particular points of view. Most of the teachers spoke enthusiastically of the response of their students to Media work. They often expressed surprise at the insights they had been able to gain into their students' perceptions and

preferred modes of working. Students who were difficult to motivate often showed new strengths. Many classes were directly concerned with cultural and social issues. Questions were constantly asked about the value of particular media texts and about the values which the texts were based on. In the process of evaluating texts, students were able to articulate a range of possible meanings and to relate their own values to others'.

Information and values

Given the potential of Media Education for teaching about values and the evident classroom successes highlighted by research, we would expect that Media Education would be embraced with enthusiasm by politicians and educational administrators. The recent Discussion Paper on *Spiritual and Moral Development* (NCC 1993) spells out in some detail the main constituents and the expected outcomes. It describes spiritual development as motivated by a search for meaning and purpose in relation to challenging life-experiences and involving the growth of self-awareness and responsibility for one's own experience and identity; the development of self-respect; recognition of the worth of others and the importance of relationships; the importance of compassion, of imaginative engagement with experience and of creative activity. Moral development is seen as based on a conscious will to behave in a morally principled way in the context of agreed social codes and conventions. It expresses itself in the making of reasoned and responsible decisions.

These descriptions of spiritual and moral characteristics may leave gaps and may not command universal assent, but the difficulty they raise is not so much ethical or philosophical as educational and pedagogical. For unfortunately the paper has nothing to say about curriculum change or classroom methods.

An important opportunity for genuine learning is being missed. Most of the goals of spiritual and moral development could be effectively reached through Media Education. But educational policy seems to be going in the opposite direction. In spite of the evident potential of Media Education in this area of values education, the Government has further reduced its potential by imposing a radical change in the process of teacher training. The most successful form of initial training, the intensive one-year post-graduate course for Secondary School subject specialists, has recently produced many English teachers with specialist training in Media Education. But the new system

announced by the Government in 1992 effectively abolishes University control of such courses by insisting that each student spends a minimum of **two thirds** of their time in schools. The likely result of this for Media Education, as for other innovative subjects, is that it will suffer because the experience and expertise of supervising students in Media Education is rarely available in schools at present.

This official neglect of Media Education may be because there remains great hostility from some politicians towards the mass media and towards television in particular. As in the 1960s, the media are still seen as the sources of moral and spiritual degeneration and blamed for social and cultural disintegration. For example, Kenneth Baker, who was one of the main architects of the National Curriculum as Secretary of State for Education, attacked television watching as the enemy of imaginative engagement in a short article in the *Sunday Times* (1988). Children, he argues, have an inner life which needs to tapped by teachers. He quotes the poet Ted Hughes on the "world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence and natural common sense, which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heart-beat". His model of English teaching is based on the idea of cultural heritage. He wants children to be taught the literary classics.

> When I visit schools, I like to call in on English lessons and am particularly pleased if the children are being taught one of the classics. I believe passionately that the future of our language depends upon us bringing up children to appreciate its past.

He sees this as a powerful antidote to the effects of the mass media. He claims that watching television bypasses the imagination. It is a predominantly visual medium which makes life too easy for viewers. Only books offer readers an "engagement with language as they wrestle to create sense out of chaos and meaning out of absurdity." He concludes that "the viewer must become a reader." Here Mr. Baker's ambiguity is accidentally prophetic. Whilst we cannot agree that students should stop watching and confine themselves to reading, we can agree that the critical skills which readers bring to literary texts also need to be brought to media texts. Media texts are too important to be ignored, and understanding them may involve highly complex 'reading' skills (Hart 1992).

So, in spite of Mr. Baker's misgivings, we would expect that the latest proposal for revising the National Curriculum for English would extend the basic mandate offered in the original version. But we would be disappointed. In the introduction to the proposals at the consultation stage, the Chair of the National Curriculum Council, David Pascall, proposed merely a supporting role for Media Education "to deliver the fundamental objective of the Order, rather than...as...distinctive areas of study..." (DFE 1993). There may be as many references to media in the new proposals as in the original Order, but most of the references envisage listening tests, spoken language awareness or elaborate comprehension exercises (DFE 1994).

Media texts mainly occur only in the form of examples which can be ignored. It is possible under the new proposals to omit Media Education from English by using other kinds of examples. The strongest reference comes in the suggestion that "Pupils should be encouraged to reflect on the language of television and radio." The context implies that 'language' refers simply to words, ignoring the crucial importance of visual images in late twentieth century communication. There is a rigid insistence on the teaching of Standard English language forms and a narrow range of 'cultural heritage' texts. The important 'personal growth' and 'cultural analysis' dimensions of English teaching which were central to the original English Order have been virtually ignored in the new proposals.

The new emphasis is on outcomes rather than process, on teaching rather than learning. Both the new English proposals and the *Spiritual and Moral Development* paper seem to share a common expectation that standards are to be taught by the efforts of teachers rather than learnt through the engagement of students. The approach is didactic and expository rather than interactive and exploratory. It assumes that values are relatively static and can be transmitted unproblematically. It assumes that they need simply to be transmitted by teachers for students to imitate. For example: "Schools should be expected to uphold those values which contain moral absolutes" (NCC 1993: 4). But schools may more usefully be seen as places where many different sets of values meet, often in conflict. In a multi-cultural society, it is at best naive and at worst disingenuous. Successful learning can only come from teaching which acknowledges schools as sites of cultural struggle, where values are contested in debate and discovered through active involvement, and where

students learn about and test out values for themselves in practical classroom situations.

While the latest analytical approaches to Media Education through 'Key Concepts' may risk creating a moral and spiritual vacuum, this more authoritarian approach to defining the curriculum risks creating a pedagogical 'black hole' into which the universe of real learning may collapse.

The privatisation of pleasure and the iconography of desire: a classroom approach to media literacy

A recent advertising campaign in the UK for the French aniseed-based aperitif Pernod contains ambiguities which take us to the centre of the debate about spiritual and moral development. On the surface, it is exactly the kind of text which authoritarian educators would want to protect children from. It does not seek to engender spiritual and moral development, but rather the opposite. Yet analysing the advertisement so as to engage with the text can provide a platform for genuine learning.

The Pernod advertisement, like many others, can usefully illustrate one of the means by which spiritual and moral values can be developed in a less authoritarian way. This approach to engaging with students' values derives from French semiological theorists, especially Roland Barthes (Barthes 1967, 1973). Every text is conceived as a set of signs chosen for specific purposes and arranged in particular ways. Each sign and each text contain latent meanings at three levels: the denotative, the connotative and the ideological.

In the case of a text like this one, students would be asked to investigate and reflect individually on three questions which correspond to the three levels of meaning:

* **What can I see in the text?**
* **What thoughts and feelings does the text suggest?**
* **What values does the text assume or express?**

Other exploratory questions might be asked, in order to articulate the implied narrative surrounding the text. For example:

- **What has just happened in the picture?**
- **What is happening now?**
- **What will happen next?**
- **What thoughts/feelings are the characters experiencing?**
- **Where would I find this text?**

Sharing individual responses to these questions reveals a wide range of possibilities, but usually focuses on a consensus about a particular 'preferred' reading which is the dominant one in a given culture (Hall 1981). The questions help to create a dialogue around interpretations of the text. These interpretations will show a degree of cultural uniformity but also the particularity of individual readings. In this way, students grasp that culture is realised inside each individual, rather than being something 'outside'. In the process of engaging with texts for themselves, they are learning about making decisions and judgements of value. They are learning to be 'critically autonomous'.

The central image is a dramatically simple one. Against a dark nocturnal background, a young woman stands illuminated by a telephone and a glass of Pernod. In the corner, the brand name and the slogan integrated with it are also illuminated. The phrase ***'FREE THE SPIRIT'*** has both literal and metaphorical potential. On the literal, material level, 'spirit' means simply any distilled alcoholic liquor. Metaphorically, it suggests notions of personal liberation through the full expression of inner desire. The golden glow of the yellow drink in the foreground held by the young woman is echoed by the telephone receiver in her other hand, by the glow of the surrounding telephone booth and by the fierce brightness in the background. A burning light source is suggested in the distance. Her crucifix-like position parallels the telegraph poles which connect her with the distant perspective. She is 'dressed for action' and her physical pose suggests eagerness, and availability. The arc of bright light which connects her drink to the distance parallels the line of the telegraph wire. The function of the whole image is to suggest that the drink can act like the telephone as a form of instant communication with a social reality to which she aspires.

The validity of this reading is strengthened by other versions of the advertisement in the same series. One of these also shows a young woman

with a glass of Pernod in her hand, this time gazing at a funfair in the distance. It also features the same slogan *'FREE THE SPIRIT'*.

'Critical autonomy' can be developed further by encouraging 'negotiated' or 'oppositional' readings which deviate from or subvert the 'preferred' reading. So, for example, with the Pernod advertisement, rather than listening to the teacher trying to expose the deviousness and deceitfulness of the visual rhetoric, students would be asked to give as many affirmative answers as possible to the question:

"Why should I drink Pernod?"

This would then lead to examining the rhetorical techniques which are used to generate the answers within the text's 'preferred' reading. In order to shift away from the 'preferred' reading, we can subvert the original question and ask:

"Why *should* I drink Pernod?"

When this particular Pernod advertisement was discussed with a class of Year 10 students at a comprehensive school, nearly all of them immediately recognised (in spite of my blanking out the verbal text) that it was an advertisement which they would expect to find in a magazine or on a street hoarding. They also picked out the key features of the text with ease: specifically, the telephone, the woman, the glass, the glowing lights, the warmth of the colours and the verbal elements. One student even recognised an iconographical reference to the Statue of Liberty. Some saw the fire in the darkness as a danger or threat to the woman, but the majority saw it as an attraction for her (for example: "the way to go forward", "an opportunity", "expecting something to happen", "the freedom of this person's mind and her thoughts allowed to travel", "escaping").

In the process of answering the key questions **"Why should I drink Pernod?"** and **"Why *should* I drink Pernod?"**, the students introduced knowledge and experience from outside the text as a basis for questioning its rhetoric. They recognized and articulated ideas and values embedded in the text which give the product a social and cultural context. Although one or two students thought that what was being advertised was a telephone or communications company, most of them recognized that the purpose of the advertisement was to associate Pernod on a connotative level with feelings of comfort and strength, power

and warmth, light and freedom. One student even remarked on the free-hand form of lettering in *'FREE THE SPIRIT'* as visually signifying the freedom which it denotes. They listed amongst reasons for drinking Pernod the implied offer of "going places and meeting people", "getting in touch with the whole world", "doing what you really want", "enjoying yourself", "excitement", "wildness", "fun", "confidence", "independence" and "the beginning of a new life". Many also saw the whole text as a dramatisation of a battle between light and darkness, with Pernod seen as a "heavenly and divine" drink which is on the side of light ("Pernod is better than the darkness in her life.... [she has] given up everything in her life for her Pernod").

Some of them saw the various religious references in the words and imagery at the outset (especially the telegraph pole\crosses), while others developed this dimension further as they reflected on reasons for **not** drinking Pernod. In addition to their articulations of the 'preferred' reading they commented on the "fantasy world", "false dreams" and "escape" offered by what was universally recognized as a dangerous and addictive drug ("instead of freeing your spirit, it kills your spirit"). Close analysis and discussion of specific semantic elements in the text enabled them to develop alternative 'oppositional' and 'negotiated' readings and to superimpose their prior knowledge about the effects of alcohol and the unreliability of the promises offered by the text. These readings showed that they were not duped by the advertisement. They also showed how they could read at different levels of significance, with an awareness of the rhetorical and ideological designs of the text. They did not need to be inoculated against the text's persuasive power. They simply needed an opportunity to demonstrate and a structure to articulate some of the cultural knowledge which they had already acquired informally.

The Pernod advertisement is typical of the way in which the advertising industry creates 'constructive dissatisfaction'. Many other examples could equally well be analysed in this way. Advertising typically offers us products as a means of escape from an unsatisfactory world into a fantastic secondary world where our dreams are fulfilled. It claims implicitly that spiritual needs can be fulfilled by material means. In the process, it tries to sell us not just a product but a set of ideas and beliefs about ourselves which have great power in our modern Western societies. One of the dangers of this process is accepting the illusion that material goods can satisfy spiritual needs.

The persuasive techniques used by advertising need special attention. Its rhetoric is relatively hidden because its propositions are put metaphorically and visually rather than logically. Its promises are only loosely associated with the product. So when the product does not satisfy the original needs, we are unlikely to feel we have been deceived by the product or by the advertisement. We are more likely to internalise our disappointment and compensate by more consumption. When the product fails to fulfil its promise, rather than rejecting the illusion or the product, we may become co-dependent in maintaining the basic illusion that material products can satisfy spiritual needs. In order that we may continue to live in our dreams, advertisements have to keep offering new promises and new dreams. Advertisers know us well. They sell us products by selling us ourselves. In this way, for those who can afford to buy, a cycle of aspiration, desire, consumption, dissatisfaction and compensation is created.

The approach I have outlined centres on questions of individual responses to advertising, but Media Education is also concerned with many other ethical issues and many other kinds of texts. The legal constraints and codes of practice which surround the media also merit investigation. In many cases, legality and morality are not identical. It would be very interesting to explore, for example, the contradictions between the relatively permissive attitude to alcohol and tobacco advertising and Health Education policy in the UK. There is also a tension worth exploring between the state's acceptance of advertising as an index of a healthy economy and its desire to develop its citizens spiritually and morally. I am not advocating more rigid controls on advertising. Nor am I suggesting that such methods can simply be exposed by teachers so as to enable students to make moral judgements which might protect them. Neither banning nor preaching is likely to be effective alone. This principle applies to the study of all media texts. Television and radio programmes, newspapers and magazines, pop music and cinema all need to be approached in a way which engages with their values and acknowledges the pleasures which they offer.

Values need to be learnt in an active and interrogative way rather than passively absorbed. Students need to learn how to decode culture from the inside and for themselves. The 'outside' world of values must be examined through the medium of individual consciousness and identity. Articulating the implications

of cultural texts makes them visible, and making them visible makes them negotiable.

The role of teacher educators in this process is crucial. We need to help schools and teachers not to ignore the media, nor to condemn them, for the media cannot simply be counteracted with a forced diet of high literary culture. The media need to be approached seriously and systematically in the classroom as a way of promoting spiritual and moral development in students. 'Critical autonomy' must create new 'watchdogs' in students' minds in order to open up every text to questioning and reflection. Many teachers of English have the basic skills to help in this, because of their special expertise in engaging and developing the imaginations of students. Yet we need to provide more and better training to help them in the process of decoding culture.

One of the ultimate goals expressed in the *Spiritual and Moral Development* paper is for schools to provide "reflective and aesthetic experience and the discussion of questions about meaning and purpose" (NCC 1993: 9). By bringing the worlds of media information and formal education together in a constructive way, Media Education offers one of the most powerful, accessible and effective ways of achieving that goal. It opens up the potential for a form of literacy which is more than functional and which recognizes that information is always value-laden.

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